BRAZILIAN POLICE

CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL BATTLES

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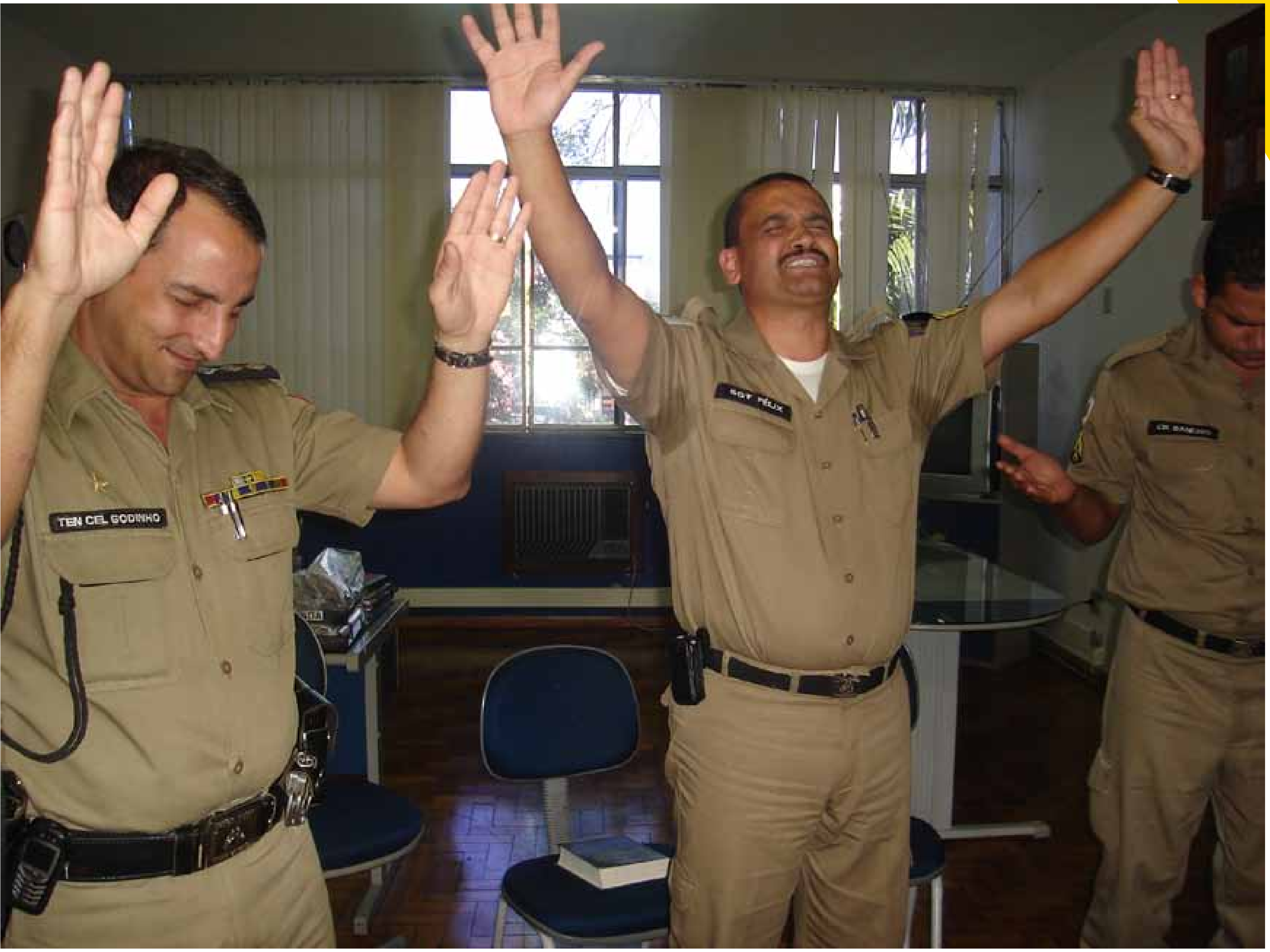

Police officers celebrating an evangelical cult leaded by the commander of the military police battalion of Belo Horizonte during the Youth & Police project. / All photographs by Susana Durão

Over the fourteen years of the Workers' Party (PT) governments of Lula da Silva and Dilma Roussef, even though only in a diffused fashion, the grammar of rights arrived in one of the main actors in its current asphyxia — the Brazilian military and civil police. Neither simply tormentors nor victims, police officers were placed in a position of getting converted to an open and very plastic rights matrix. Over the following paragraphs, I explore some of the contours of that tension certainly not reduced to but nevertheless singular to this particular spot of the globe.

Policing in Brazil often gets diagnosed as a product of a violent society, a legacy of an authoritative, inquisitorial, colonial culture, and the stage for a particularly disruptive institution: a killing machine in peaceful times. The same information comes out annually, the Brazilian police force is the world champion of homicides. Almost 16% of registered murders are performed by police officers. As such, the military police (PM) force, and to a certain extent the civil police, two separate institutions enforcing law and order in cities and answering to their state governors, are deemed part of the problem instead of the solution to public safety.

Of every one hundred crimes in the country, over 90 never get solved. Hence, only a range of between 5% and 8% of murderers are found guilty. Let us also not forget that, according to data from the World Health Organization, Brazil is the country with the highest rate of death by civilian-owned firearms. Furthermore, the police and criminal-justice system are simply unprepared to deal with this situation. To make things still worse, the Brazilian police forces are widely known for their extrajudicial executions: the "death squads," certainly responsible for the still popular sentence "a good bandit is a dead bandit" (*bandido bom é bandido morto*). With the tacit or explicit support of the state, paramilitary units are a vivid legacy of the military government period (1964-1985) surviving on under the umbrella of democracy. "Impunity is the rule in Brazil," the UN evaluates. Likewise, and not surprisingly, in 2016, the United Nations recommended the abolition of the military police force in in the country.

The popular singer Chico Buarque enshrined this same idea in his song "Acorda Amor" released in 1974 with Brazil then under military dictatorship. He chronicles how the police assault his apartment building, and he ends up calling in a thief to help protect him. Following the democratic turn, sections of civil society called for a new human rights paradigm for supervising police behavior. Identifying and reversing the "democratic disjunction" in the policing and criminal justice system, as the anthropologists Teresa Caldeira and John Holston once wrote, has represented one of the main goals of human rights and civil movements. Despite the amount of thought subsequently invested in reforms, many people still mock the prevailing situation by using Chico song's refrain "call the thief" (*chama o ladrão*), in reference to the police, and correspondingly illustrate how profound the social fear and distrust of the police might reach.

In August 2016, after the parliamentary *coup d'état* brought down President Dilma, demonstrations and nonconformist political acts occupied the streets of Brazil's main cities. The police responded with impressive and spectacular force, and thus become once again the target of human-rights organizations. Many protested against the remarkable contradictions manifested by PM officers during the pro-impeachment motion when they accepted to be photographed next to smiling, and mostly wealthy, citizens decked out in the yellow and green colors of the Brazilian national flag some months before. Are the police governed or governing? The old question arises. According to Max Weber, due to their insular frameworks, police bureaucracies are easily manipulated by governments in order to manipulate wider populations. Marxist versions portray the police as an armed wing of the state, a state within a state. However, history defies theories.

In Brazil, since June 2013, when all sorts of manifestations of social and political dissatisfaction began to be staged on the streets, the police have been getting co-opted by the new political impetus. Some would say the police violence, which was previously relegated to poor favelas (especially targeting young Black males) and indigenous homelands, became an attractive political and electoral spectacle. In the heat of the great demonstrations of 2014, the governing candidates of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo won their elections by a large scale after producing great spectacles of police violence.

Nevertheless, even when confronted with such scenarios, experts and intellectual optimists refuse to believe in the nullity of decades of work on public policies for public safety and police reforms. In the Brazilian case, such a process culminates in the campaign for the PEC-5, a constitutional amendment promising to revolutionize the institutional system. As the former public safety secretary Luiz Eduardo Soares declared in *Segurança tem saída* in 2006, "There is hope for public safety [in Brazil]." According to Jaqueline Muniz, a well-known academician of policing studies and a central member of the Brazilian Forum on Public Safety, there is no use in yelling "let's end the military police" during the left-wing *Fora Temer* (Temer Out) demonstrations, as has recently happened. The slogan ignores a study that reveals how 76% of police officers themselves agree about changing the military paradigm. As Muniz's argument goes, demonstrations are not against the police but for the restoration of democracy. Front-line police soldiers, not their commanders, are as oppressed as those progressively seeing their rights constrained by Michel Temer's provisional and radical neoliberal government. We cannot and must not provide the means for the oppressed to become the oppressors, says Muniz, and humanizing the police before changing their militarist structures provides an intermediate and realistic step.

Muniz and many others summarize this ethos, not as a compromise of virtuous ethics, but rather as the result of ten years of reformist struggle. Experts agree that all citizens, and certainly public intellectuals, have a responsibility when promoting ideas about the police, especially in Latin-American contexts. After all, they, the cops, read what we write and declare, they posit. The consensus emerging advocates pedagogy for humanization. As Balestreri, a prominent Brazilian legalist, says, police training and an advanced education in human rights have no efficacy when the officers themselves are not considered citizens. In his words, more than *homo faber* they are *homo humanus*. In sum, to become public safety experts, police officers may themselves have to learn how to reimagine their work. To do so, society has to be able to imagine officers as subjects with rights.

Not surprisingly, at the eye of the hurricane over the last decade, the police organizations present themselves as more permeable to metaphors of crisis. An idea has spread: individually, inside each police officer, there resides a human being in crisis and, as such, in pain. They are (almost exclusively) men with power, and yet afflicted. As promoters and receptors of violence, police officers are often perceived as a locus on which something and someone has to act. Several programs and associations promote this widely-accepted notion that in each one of those bodies there is a soul in permanent need of healing. Not sufficiently, the programs must be publicized and mediatized. Although limited in its scope, proselytism ways related with the transformation of each individual police officer becomes one of the main politics of contemporary Brazil.

My sources of inspiration arise from diverse movements engaged in the moral transformation of the police that I followed closely between 2007 and 2009, and since then from a distance. One includes the Youth & Police project, run by a huge and highly-funded grassroots NGO in Rio named the Afro-Reggae Cultural Group (CGAR) in partnership with the Center of Studies of Security and Citizenship (CESeC). Another comes from the emergence of Christian religious movements in police organizations, especially the Military Police Soldiers of Christ (PMs de Cristo) and the Evangelical Union State Military Police of Rio de Janeiro (UEPMERJ). In their own ways, the movements are talking about the inner battles of officers, putting the individual cop and their humanity at the center of demands for rights. Each police officer becomes the focus of a cultural and spiritual battle.

Afro-Reggae sells all sorts of marketing products but, in the main, falling under the auspices of its evocative slogan: "Culture is our weapon." That also provides the title to a book telling the history of the movement that connects its origins to the Vigario Geral slaughter in 1993. Another military metaphor, the "spiritual battle," widespread in contemporary Brazilian Pentecostal spheres, has penetrated the police. Both movements deal with individual conversion in a singular way. They display a language and practices centered on the transformation of the body and the person, and less on a language that triggers parameters of judgment or encompasses actions of conflict. More than policing prevention, both movements help each officer to protect themselves and their kin from a deep and permanent moral crisis.

The mediatized NGO advocates a special "social technology," as creative as it is expansive, to deal with and intervene in the cultural zones of production of poor, racial, and violent stereotypes. Afro-Reggae is located in more than eight favelas of Rio de Janeiro. For two weeks in 2007, I participated in one of its most important initiatives, the so called Youth & Police. In a partnership with the state security secretary of Minas Gerais, the project involved dozens of officers of a PM battalion, ex-convict arts and sports monitors, and students from two Belo Horizonte favelas reputed for their violent environments. The design of the project mimicked post-conflict truth and reconciliation mediation processes. Invariably, many of the workshop activities culminated in a moment of public presentation, preferably jointly, of converted cops and bandits (bandidos). They are the frontline image of the so called "Afro-Reggae person," staging a biographical narrative of moving from despair to hope.

Over the course of the years all the agencies involved in Youth & Police activities decided to change the program's bias. First planned merely as a "cultural invasion" of the police battalions, the target changed to the empowerment and capacity-building of particular officers, specifically to act as part-time monitors of art workshops in the favelas' public high schools. That coincided with the passage of responsibility for the program into the hands of the Military Police in Minas. There was a belief that schools would finally contain within, in the role of monitors, an authoritative figure, a "good exemplary cop." Despite the news and mediatized campaigns conveying how successful the project was, I was able to ascertain over the years how students were still required to live and cope with the major presence of traditional conflictive, "non-converted" cops, municipal and private security guards, CCTV control, and electric fences securing the school perimeter, as if performing a war zone. As the years went by, the Minas PM was unable to keep up with what had started out as an NGO project.

The evangelic soldiers and sergeants I met tended to work administrative tasks. This is a self-defense tactic to reduce the probability of doing harm and killing other humans, themselves considered in pain, from a Christian point of view. But Marcelo, a Baptist inspector of the civil police was unable to escape. I met him in May 2008 when he was a student in the graduate public safety program at the Federal University of Niteroi. In the middle of our cool conversation on the campus, he received a fateful telephone call. It was his superior, the delegado, warning him that he would be punished because he had refused to implement an illegal order. The delegado was pressing Marcelo to make a false crime-report on a prostitute and two tourists. They had been arrested by the PM in Lapa, who claimed they were trafficking cocaine but without presenting any evidence. The telephone call left him with the impression that something really serious was about to happen. He spent the rest of our conversation instructing me where to tell his story in case he ended up being killed by one of his colleagues, starting with the international organization Human Rights Watch. In the end, in Marcelo's case, spiritual salvation meant professional and institutional condemnation. One year later, I would meet him again. As a punishment, he had been transferred to a remote place. So he had decided to resign from the force and find another way of living.

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(1) Camargo, the proud sergeant of Tiradentes' 13th Battalion in downtown Rio heading the Friday's Pentecostal cult with his soldiers and other "civil" visitors, in January 2009.
(2) At the end of each session of Youth & Police project at the police battalion, all main participants proved their commitment to the cultural transformation by holding hands.
(3) All workshops contributed to the big final event with the presence of sponsors, local politics and higher rank officers. Here the percussion group celebrating the last day of the program.
(4) The street dance group (involving monitors, favela's youth, and police soldiers) during one workshop session at the police battalion.

When we start observing everyday movements created to interfere and change the police through individual bodies and souls, notions of crisis, self, and biographical pain come to the fore. In the cases I have briefly described, the human being located inside the officer prevails on fundamental political rights. Somehow, officers have to be woken up to be considered apt for the job, whether by culture or religion, or both, indistinctly. Without recognizing their own inner individual humanity, police officers are considered unprepared to be professionals, and certainly unable to consider and respect others and their rights.

Although diffuse, it is no exaggeration to say that movements such as those I have described opened up the scope for imagining and implementing the Police Pacification Units (UPPs) in Rio in 2008. A group of new, unpolluted and yet to be corrupted PM rookies were trained to pacify a set of favelas situated around what would become the 2016 Olympic village site. The officers were pacified to pacify the poor. In different sizes, shapes, and command styles, 38 UPPs are today installed in 200 shantytowns (among the 763 *favelas* corresponding to 22% of Rio's population). More than 10 thousand officers patrol areas inhabited by 1.5 million people. At first, the UPPs were feted as a new style of policing able to reduce homicide and the reported rates of criminality. However, as the homicide of the mason Amarildo at the hands of the police in 2013 in Rocinha and other cases show, the military and violent police ethos has proved stronger. At the present moment, the UPPs and their officers are in the crosshairs of human and civil rights associations, denouncing how the police, instead of mediating peace, provide the scope for the local morality to govern the poor with the corresponding shrinkage of its cultural life.

The UPPs, evangelical police movements, and the Afro-Reggae project against police and youth violence all place the individual person of the officer at the leading edge of social and cultural transformation. Cultural and spiritual battles become individual fights. Officers are embedded in an ideal responsibility to improve and even transform police institutions. Marcelo's case puts into perspective how oppressive the liberal desire for truth and individual virtue may be in the present public safety and policing system in Brazil. In his case and in many others I know, this spiritual navigation, when not contextually negotiated, may rather condemn police officers to silence or abandoning the police force. In a similar tone, Afro Reggae converted people to perform acts of almost impossible hope to counter the securitization of cities and the public schools of the urban poor in Brazil. Believing in the individual redemption of police officers against the faceless, atavistic forces of an authoritative culture and segregated cities seems to have become a common mantra for a structural policing change that is made to wait still longer.

Susana Durão's research focuses on international police cooperation in Lusophone countries as well as on patrol and community policing with particular emphasis on the everyday-life of police bureaucracies. She is the author of three books, *Patrol and Proximity: An Ethnography of Police in Lisbon*; *Police, Security and Public Order: Portuguese and Brazilian Perspectives and Police Station*. She teaches social anthropology at the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP, São Paulo).